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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the body of research on adult learning and adult college experiences and outcomes that can inform the planning, development, and evaluation of accelerated degree programs. It addresses many of the issues confronting faculty and administrators as they design accelerated programs using a model of college outcomes developed to explain adult learners' experiences in college. The model, which offers a way of describing and understanding the experience for adults and nontraditional students, consists of: (1) prior experience and personal biographies; (2) psychosocial and value orientations; (3) adult cognition; (4) the connecting classroom; (5) life-world experience; and (6) college outcomes. The model was supplemented by research that asked adult students to define success in learning and in college and to identify the factors that led to their perceived success. These findings were used to develop a set of principles to help college administrators design programs that foster the best results. These principles are grouped according to the components of the model of college outcomes. These principles emphasize considering the past experiences of adult students and designing instruction to emphasize the connections between present instruction and past experience. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Accelerated Degree Programs: Policy Implications and Critique: What We Know about Adult Learners and Its Implications for Policy

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Introduction

There is a significant body of research on adult learning and adult college experiences and outcomes that can inform the planning, development, and evaluation of accelerated degree programs. From previous research we know there are specific attributes about adult learners that make them somewhat unique and there are ways to design programs that can make learning more meaningful for them. As one example, adults reflect on rich and extensive personal experiences and draw on their previous knowledge and wisdom to "make meaning" of new material. Furthermore, in many instances, adults use the classroom as a stage to intensify their learning and enhance their interactions with peers and instructors to achieve additional benefits that many younger students do not obtain from the classroom. Research on adults' perceptions of exemplary collegiate instruction for adults suggests that the social aspects of instruction (i.e., development of a community of learners within classes and having a respectful and caring instructor) are critical factors for adult students (Donaldson, 1991). Additionally there are numerous policy issues and curriculum design considerations that deserve discussion before programs are implemented (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Graham & Donaldson, 1996; Kasworm, 1995, 1997, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

With the increased popularity of accelerated courses and programs there are any number of issues that should be addressed in light of what we know about good administrative and curricular practices. We have grouped some of these issues according to four categories:

1. Policy and Administrative questions such as: Are policies for accelerated programs guided by current academic policies, national guidelines, and input from the regular college faculty? Do the traditional faculty members play a critical role in shaping the policies for accelerated degree programs?
2. Student Learning questions such as: Are course format changes based on strategies that

enhance student learning or designed solely to attract more student enrollments? Can adults accomplish the work necessary outside of class with busy lifestyles – and if not, what is being displaced?

3. Research and Evaluation Questions such as: Are new accelerated formats being studied to determine their effectiveness on present and continued learning capacities? What are the key research questions we need to be asking and how are we collecting the data that will allow us to improve practice?
4. Faculty questions such as: Are instructors designing the courses to be equivalent to their traditional course counterparts or are key elements being eliminated? Have faculty members developed exciting new strategies that could be used in the traditional classrooms?

Throughout the following paper we will try to address many of these issues confronting faculty and administrators who are designing accelerated program and review what is known about adult learning and its implications for program design. After examining these elements we offer a set of recommended principles for designing accelerated programs.

Elements That Influence Adults' Learning in College

To help articulate some of these issues, in a recent article we proposed a "Model of College Outcomes" to help explain the adult learners' experiences in college (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). The model offers a new way of describing and understanding the experience for adults and other non-traditional students and might help those who are designing accelerated programs for adults. It consists of six components: (a) *Prior Experience and Personal Biographies*, (b) *Psycho-social and Value Orientations*, (c) *Adult Cognition*, (d) the *Connecting Classroom*, (e) *Life-world Environment* and (f) *College Outcomes*. The components are explained briefly below.

Prior Experience and Personal Biographies

Adults return to college with rich personal biographies that have been influenced by their prior experiences in the real " adult world." These experiences range from the inauthentic (e.g., formal schooling), to the simulated (e.g., college clubs or service learning from earlier college experiences), to the authentic (e.g., the real social and cultural contexts of adult life where adults participate as workers and family and community members). These personal biographies influence their perceptions of themselves, their education, the classroom, their knowledge structures and consequently influence learners' motivations, self-esteem, self-confidence, and responsibility and how they interpret their college experiences, including accelerated programs (Kasworm, 1995, 1997, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Psycho-social and Value Orientations

Many psychosocial dimensions influence adults' abilities to persist and achieve success in college. These include the presence or absence of psychological distress, the adults' commitment to the student role, their readiness for college work and adequate study skills, their motivation and having a clear purpose for participation, and the competing life roles with which most adults must contend. Adults draw upon metacognitive skills developed by their extensive experience and self-knowledge that allow them to manage their time and energies to get the most out of school. Finally, adult students are generally more concerned than their younger peers with the cognitive and quality aspects of their education and focus on achieving direct benefits from college and seeking as much as possible from the experience (Kasworm, 1995, 1997, 2001; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The Connecting Classroom

A number of researchers have offered evidence that the classroom is the focal point for learning for adults stimulating connections to their life experiences and adult roles (Bean & Metzner,

1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1997; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm, Donaldson, Graham & Dirkx, 2000). One explanation of how adults compensate for their lack of time is that their class-related learning and relationships with faculty and other students make up the most powerful influences of their campus experiences. In addition, if adults have limited interactions with the college environment, they may instead gain support from family, friends, and co-workers and others. The classroom is seen as the center stage of the collegiate experience for adults (Kasworm, 1995; 1997). It interacts with the other aspects of their experience to connect adults with their instructors and student peers. The classroom interactions also provide a social context for learning and shape their perceptions of their role as college students.

Adult Cognition

The *Adult Cognition* component encompasses three forms of cognition: (a) declarative and procedural knowledge structures, (b) metacognitive or self-regulatory processes, and (c) cognitive operations (e.g., accretion, transformation) through which their knowledge structures develop (Anderson, 1993; Bruer, 1993; Rummelhart & Norman, 1978). It is concerned with the knowledge structures and learning processes adults bring to college and those they develop in their in-class and out-of-class experiences. The adults' prior experiences also provide them with practical know-how about how to manage their time and study methods as well as their interactions and relationships with instructors. The abundance and complexity of the various life-roles of family member, worker, and student also interact and shape patterns of thinking and ways of connecting the new knowledge to their own rich experiences in college (Kasworm and Blowers, 1994). For example, adults report they learn expert knowledge by using either a hierarchical, building block, or a networking approach to connect the existing knowledge to the unfamiliar new knowledge and to forge meaningful connections to academic and real-world knowledge (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994, Kasworm, 1997).

Life-World Environment

The model's *Life-World Environment* component includes the social settings outside the collegiate environment and the people adults depend upon for support for their collegiate learning activities. It includes such aspects as their family, their work, and the communities where they participate as citizens and leaders. "Reinforcing agents," such as family members, co-workers, supervisors, and community members in the out-of-class social settings either provide psychological and social support for adults to return to pursue their collegiate studies(including in accelerated programs), or undermine their efforts (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2001). These settings also serve as out-of-class contexts for learning and serve as alternative avenues for conventional campus involvement (e.g., social clubs, campus activities, work-study experiences). In these environments, adults construct meaning for what they are learning in their classrooms and often have opportunities to apply what they have learned.

College Outcomes for Adults

The last component of the model focuses on the outcomes derived from the college experience. In the model, conventional definitions of college outcomes such as intellectual, knowledge-related, and emotional growth are recognized, yet others are highlighted as well. For example, Kasworm (1995, 1997) found that traditional academic outcomes were connected to the adults' perceptions of how well they integrated the academic and life-world knowledge structures. These outcomes included (a) separate and distinct academic and life-world knowledge structures -- where learners maintained a distinction between what they were learning in class and their life experiences (b) elaborated life-world knowledge structures -- where students used what they had learned in college to elaborate on what they knew as a result of their learning in their life and (c) integrated and transformed life-world and academic knowledge structures -- where adults were able to integrate what they had learned across the various life-world and collegiate contexts in which they were engaged. These variations in outcomes suggest adults may have conceptions of successful college outcomes that differ from the conventional ones used in outcomes and involvement studies and influence how the adults think of their current learning experiences (Donaldson, Graham,

Martindill, & Bradley, 2000).

How Adults Translate the Elements of the Model into Practice

Once we created the Model of College Outcomes, we conducted another study to see if students were able to translate these elements of their life into practice and if they could articulate their own experiences (Donaldson, et al, 2000). This study also served as an opportunity to explore the various elements of the model and check their face validity with the adult learners. We interviewed a number of adult college students to see if they could explain two key issues in their own words (a) their definitions of success in college and (b) those key factors that either supported or hindered achievement of success as students defined it.

As a result of analyzing our interview data, there were two main themes that emerged with the adult learners. First was the notion of adults' definition of success in learning and in college and in the factors that lead to their perceived success. Both of these main themes as well as key constructs embedded in them are articulated below.

Adults' Definition of Success

Although adult students were asked to define what success in college meant to them, most made mutually exclusive distinctions between success in college and success in learning, using two rather dramatic distinctions – (a) ownership of knowledge and standards for judging success, where words like "theirs" and "mine" were used to connote ownership, and (b) the potentiality or value of what was learned.

Success in college. Most adult students ' defined success in college in terms of someone else's definition of success. These definitions also incorporated external, established standards for judging success and externally provided understandings of the potential future value of the knowledge or the credential obtained. Students spoke of success in college as "meeting instructors' expectations," "getting the degree," "making good grades," and learning and obtaining knowledge of future value as instructors defined this potentiality for them.

Success in learning. In contrast to adults ' definition of success in college, they defined success in their learning in terms of their ownership of knowledge and standards, and in terms of

the "actuality" or direct experience with the value of what they were learning. Adults talked, for example, about being able to learn "what was applicable to me," "learn what I wanted to learn," "applying what I learn in class to my job."

Factors Contributing to Their Success

Another element we probed with the adult students was why they were succeeding when all the traditional student demographics seemed to be working against them (i.e., rusty academic background, previous negative experiences with college, severe limits on their time, the demands of multiple life roles, etc.) As we analyzed the interviews, there were six distinct dimensions that differed from those success factors typically associated with outcomes for traditional college age students.

Experiences. Prior experience, especially from work, helped them manage their time better and have the organizational skills that helped them be efficient in their studies. These experiences also permitted them to incorporate what they had learned outside college into their studies and to apply what they were learning in college immediately in their life roles. A more accurate and realistic world view provided them, more than traditional age students, with a sense of what was more important about college and about what to learn for its future utility.

Maturity. Prior experience placed adult students at a different point in their developmental trajectory, permitting them to concentrate on learning rather than other developmental tasks that have been associated with traditional age students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In addition, adult students who reported more success in learning (as opposed to just having success in college) also spoke of how their maturation, set of values, -- or having "gone down the road" -- had prepared them to make good judgments about what they wanted to learn and how best to learn for different types of success.

Motivation. Adult students reported a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that contributed to their success. Intrinsic factors included 'personal satisfaction" in completing college, being "goal oriented," providing a "role model for children," desiring a better life, and being "dedicated to learning rather than earning a grade." Some of the adults

spoke of time as a motivating factor, noting that for them, "time was running out" for them to complete college. Most adults reported two major, related extrinsic motivators for their success – paying for college themselves and seeing college as an "investment,' for additional money and for their careers.

Self-monitoring. Adult students demonstrated knowledge of themselves as learners, as well as the ability to monitor themselves in relation to the learning of different content and meeting different goals. They talked about their awareness of the "consequences" of their actions and learning strategies, and the "barriers" and "limits" to their learning and to their success. Adults identified a range of strategies such as good time management and organizational strategies that they had learned from work experiences they employed to be successful in their learning and in college. Other adults reported they used different strategies to achieve different types of success -- e.g., cramming to get good test grades but realizing knowledge retention would be fleeting (success in college) versus focusing on deeper understanding and improved retention gained through active in-class participation in small group discussions and projects (success in learning).

Reinforcement systems. Adults spoke of employers who encouraged them by providing time off, offering financial assistance, and by allowing them to incorporate in their work what they were learning. They talked about friends and family members who encouraged them, who provided childcare while they attended class, and who helped them find time to study. Some talked about former teachers who remained a constant source of support and encouragement as they returned to college. Adults also spoke of these systems operating in negative ways. One mentioned an employer who did not value her return to higher education and provided no support for her doing so. Others mentioned spouses or other family members who did not support re-entry into college, a situation that created stress for the adults and interfered with their studies.

Classroom experiences. Adults defined classroom experiences across four dimensions – social engagement, knowledge connection, motivation, and instruction. Adults spoke of the

classroom as providing a venue for their connecting with others, as their primary place for engagement on campus, due to lack of time for conventional forms of involvement. They talked about the importance of peer relationships developed in the classroom. Although these peer relationships provided them with a way to engage socially, they also noted that before class, in class, during breaks, and after class, interactions with peers went beyond the social to focus on learning course subject matter.

Adults spoke highly of professors who "were passionate about their subject," "motivated students," "rewarded a student's efforts," and "had high expectations." Instructional strategies that helped them learn included helping them fit their studies into their larger patterns of adult life, providing effective "examples and explanations" of ideas, using "in-class discussion" of topics, and conducting "group projects that kept them actively involved" in their learning. However, adult students also reported instances where instructors and instruction interfered with their success – especially in learning. They identified instructors who assumed students were homogenous, failed to understand different approaches to learning, and expected adults to learn "irrelevant information."

Suggested Principles for Designing Accelerated Programs

All of these findings suggest that the adults' college learning experiences can be very powerful and beneficial if the courses are designed in a way that allows them to take advantage of their unique experiences and wisdom. By looking at the research findings and what we know about adults and their college experiences, administrators can make judgments about the value of the programs and decide what elements should be retained and what can be modified. When developing accelerated programs it is also important to examine institutional practices to focus on those issues that are critical to the students and the institution. Below we have developed a list of principles that should help college administrators design programs that will foster the best results.

While many of these principles are good practices for any adult education or training program, they are particularly critical for accelerated programs. We have grouped these points to match the key elements of the Model of College Outcomes.

Designing Accelerated Programs Based on Adult Learning Principles

Prior Experience and Personal Biographies

1. **Instructors should value what learners already know, help them to articulate and make it explicit, and help them evaluate the quality of what they know.** Learners' preconceived notions and "practice scripts" should be confronted and tested. Although a principle to be followed in all instruction, this principle gains added value in situations where time is short and efficiency of learning is necessary.

2. **Instructional strategies and techniques, as well as class projects, should be designed to connect with what learners already know and build upon it.** This will require assessment of prior knowledge prior to an accelerated program. The time spent in this assessment will, however, ultimately pay dividends in saving time and enhancing learning.

3. **Instructors should be sensitive to adult learners' evaluations of themselves as learners and see their participation in accelerated programs as opportunities for adults' reassessment of themselves.** Adults perceive themselves as learners based upon prior experiences in conventional academic structures. Accelerated courses and programs differ from conventional structures, offering adults an opportunity to reconsider and modify expectations for themselves.

Psycho-Social and Value Orientations

1. **Instructors should help learners see how accelerated courses or programs differ from conventional formats and how the format itself can "support" and "push" them to completion**. This realization will serve to reinforce adults' motivations for returning to and completing college. It will also encourage them to take their coursework seriously, focus on what they can learn, and not accept "the easy way out."

2. **Administrators and instructors can enhance adult motivation by demonstrating that accelerated programs permit outcomes to be achieved in a comparatively short time.** Former students can be used to share their perceptions of the value of courses or programs with prospective and current learners. Former students who have been able to apply their new knowledge at work or in their lives can help reinforce the value of the academic material.

3. **Attention should be focused on how accelerated programs can lead to depth, as opposed**

to breadth, of coverage and knowledge. Adults tend to be motivated to learn at a deep rather than at superficial level. Therefore, demonstrating that accelerated programs will satisfy this learning preference should also enhance learner motivation.

4. **Strategies to reduce psychological distress need to be employed by administrators and instructors.** These strategies include drawing upon adults' time management skills, study skills, and self-monitoring abilities gained through prior experience and fostering the development of supportive social networks within and outside courses/programs. These strategies can be employed to enhance the learning experience outside the classroom on projects, papers, case studies, or group assignments.

The Connecting Classroom

1. **Any unnecessary content, or "busywork" should be and eliminated in order to fit into an accelerated format.** Adults are very busy people, so there should be a clear purpose for each assignment. Adults have low tolerance for assignments that are perceived as busy-work or irrelevant and do not help them learn or apply the material. That does not mean instructors should cut out important material or reduce the legitimate assignments and content and "water down" the course. However, design each assignment to serve as a valuable learning experience.

2. **Design the classroom climate so that students can explain and translate knowledge for other learners.** Participants who become actively involved in the learning activities will also offer clues as to what concepts may not be understood by others, as well as when new information may be hard to apply to real life.

3. **Expertise across multiple cultures and communities of practice should be recognized, valued, and used in instruction.** In the connecting classroom, learning occurs in community in social participation where expertise in social and disciplinary cultures is valued. There is a range of novice-expert roles that faculty and students can play, and learning is interactive and contextual.

4. **Instruction should be adjusted to permit learners to connect what they are learning in-class and out.** Adults prefer authentic learning activities where they use new information to solve problems or tackle meaningful activities in their lives. This makes the material relevant and allows them to see applications in the real world, both of which foster recall and understanding. This will require use of instructional strategies and assignments that have high fidelity with learners' broader life-worlds, experiences, and situations. To the extent possible, physical and cultural tools should be similar across in-class and out-of-class contexts.

5. **The classroom should be viewed as a multicultural place for learners in the broader world rather than a uni-cultural world of the collegiate environment.** The classroom is but one place in the broader context of the learning society.

Adult Cognition

1. **Design activities or assignments that draw out existing knowledge**. Learners will connect any new information to existing mental schema. While this is true for children as well as adults, adults often have rich mental schema that have developed through life experiences and challenges and are naturally practice based.

2. **Foster classroom experiences that allow adults to confront previous mental conceptions of the new material**. Adults may have misconceptions about new knowledge based on their interpretations of extensive work or life experiences. Further, much of what they "know" is *implicit*. For adults to critically examine their models of practice, they must make these models for practice *explicit*. Many of these preconceptions have not been tested or clearly articulated so adults need to discuss their conceptions of the content and confront elements that need to be revised so new information is retained.

3. **Design course activities and assignments that integrate the content with their work.** Adults should be able to do something immediately with their newly acquired knowledge. By virtue of the fact they are taking responsibility for their learning and juggling a number of life roles, they want the new material to be practical and relevant whenever possible. Providing them with ways to link the new information with their current work or lives is very powerful for them.

4. **Instructors should recognize that the relevancy of new knowledge is a key feature for adult learners.** They are motivated by new knowledge that applies to their lives and that they can put into play immediately. Knowledge that has little or no practical application or seems to be frivolous is not important to them. Further, even complicated mathematical computations can be meaningful if connections and applications are drawn to the real world.

5. **Don't treat all material the same and allow the course format to dictate the amount of time spent on the different elements of the course.** Decisions must be made about the time necessary for students to internalize different kinds of content and knowledge – e.g., their differences for declarative and procedural knowledge. There is a difference between memorizing something for a test and being able to do something with it. Recognize that content that students already know from outside a course made can be covered more quickly if the previous knowledge can be drawn out and proper connections are made. Lastly, take the time necessary to cover content that is complex or completely foreign to them.

Life-World Environment

1. **Learners' time for learning can be used most efficiently by integrating learning and knowledge use with learners' roles at work, in the family, and in the community**. Out of class settings serve as contexts for learning and places where adults construct meaning for what they are learning in the classroom. To the extent to which the classroom and other settings can be connected, time will be used efficiently and more effective learning will be fostered. Projects that are designed to integrate new learning with a life goal or work objective promote efficient use of time and foster learning.

2. **The classroom climate and the organization for learning (e.g., use of cohorts, group projects) must offer social support and genuine caring for all learners.** Accelerated programs, by virtue of their intensity, both permit and require learners to rely more on the social network of learners and instructors present in the course or program.

3. **An orientation should provide learners with accurate information about the program and strategies for renegotiating their life roles while in the program.** Accelerated programs require adults to modify activities in order to successfully integrate learning and study into their already busy lives. They need support to help them renegotiate their roles and activities. Information is needed so learners can provide families, friends, employers with accurate information about the nature of the program in which learners will be engaged. Such information is required for reinforcing agents outside the classroom to provide needed understanding and support for learners.

College Outcomes for Adults

1. **Both mastery and ownership of knowledge should be goals of programs.** Ownership of the knowledge relates to adults' ability to use the knowledge in broader life-world contexts. Adults need to be able to translate their new knowledge into practice and apply it in their lives. This personal ownership promotes understanding and retention.

2. **Elaboration of life-worlds knowledge structures minimally and integrative, transformative learning preferably, should be the desired outcome of accelerated programs.** Achievement of either demonstrates levels of success in connecting in-class learning with out-of-class life-world environments.

Administration and curriculum

1. **Administrative trivia should be reduced/eliminated.** While this is generally a good practice for all programs, spending any time on administrative activities in an accelerated program can be overwhelming. Further, students are likely to be tolerant of fewer choices, such as decisions on where to buy textbooks or how to collect fees, as an acceptable tradeoff for a program that allows them to jump right in.

2. **The course format and structure should be articulated clearly from the beginning so adult students are aware of deadlines and assignments.** Because there is little room for confusion and extended deadlines, clearly articulated syllabi and course requirements are a must. Decisions must be made about the importance of prerequisites – either to a number of credits/course experiences prior to beginning a program – or in recognizing that some content and courses may not be amenable to an accelerated format.

3. **Multiple entry points should be developed to allow students to access material.** This might include different channels of communication (both synchronous and asynchronous) as well as allowing students to pace completion of the program to adjust to the multiple roles they assume in their out-of-class lives.

4. **The schedule for accelerated programs (such as the number of weeks, contact hours, breaks between sessions, completion times) should be varied according to the course content, type of knowledge, variability of learners' pre-existing knowledge, etc.** It is clearly inappropriate to try to use a "one-size fits all" model for a wide variety of academic areas. Further, there are probably some content areas where accelerated programs may not be feasible and more extended formats are required – i.e. one size does not fit all.

5. **Practitioners who have a strong academic knowledge and can connect learning with practice and existing student knowledge are popular instructors in adult programs.** Creating workshops where practitioners work closely with traditional faculty members can help both groups adapt their instructional approaches to achieve relevancy, efficiency, and connectivity for learners. Likewise, despite the fact that practitioners have extensive practice knowledge, they may not have the up-to-date academic knowledge of traditional faculty members. Consequently, both groups can benefit from ongoing interactions about the course content and how it is taught.

6. **Accelerated course content should be aligned closely to campus curriculum and subsequent courses students may take.** This can become a challenge when working with faculty who work different "shifts" (it is critical to make sure accelerated programs cover the same essential ground as regular courses). Doing anything else can quickly undermine the credibility of the program in both the short and long term. In addition, program elements (courses, other experiences) must align clearly in a learner-supportive manner.

7. **Likewise, curricular alignment to the overall program structure is necessary** -- i.e. prerequisites and courses offered in more conventional time format.

8. **Decisions about who establishes course standards must be clearly articulated. Normally most all curriculum decisions are made by regular committees of faculty members and should not be made by programmers or administrative officials.** The traditional academic "checks and balances" of the campus are critical to build credibility and promote the program's long-term health. Likewise, decisions about course content and what is considered essential and what is not must be made consciously and not haphazardly by individual instructors. Ongoing conversations about course content and curriculum are particularly important in accelerated programs.

9. **Readings assigned prior to the official "start" of a course and advance organizers used prior to formal instruction can become effective ways to make the best use of limited class time in accelerated programs.** Both techniques assist learners in coping with reduced time in the classroom and the intensity of instruction and they foster learning.

10. **Faculty development is an essential strategy in accelerated programming.** Faculty must learn ways to adapt instruction to shorter formats in ways that can actually enhance the learning of adults. Many of these strategies have been highlighted under earlier categories.

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